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# Family Involvement in School and Low-Income Children's Literacy Performance

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## Introduction

Families' involvement in children's education takes a variety of forms, including involvement in the home (e.g., help with homework), involvement in the school (e.g., attending open houses), parent-teacher communication, and parent-to-parent communication. Reviews of family involvement research indicate that, on average, children whose families are more involved display higher levels of achievement than children whose families are less involved (e.g., Jeynes, 2005). Most family involvement research, however, has been based on comparisons between children whose families display high levels of involvement versus those whose families display low levels of involvement. There exists little research looking at changes within families to determine if increases in involvement are associated with improvements in child achievement. Moreover, until recently, we have known very little about the developmental consequences of family involvement for low-income children—the very children who are at exceptional risk of developing academic problems and who are often the focus of public policy aimed at increasing family educational involvement (e.g., U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). With these limitations in mind, our team has been investigating longitudinal associations between family educational involvement and low-income children's development during elementary school.

## Our Study

In this digest, we provide an overview of findings from our most recent study (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006), in which we examined associations between changes in family educational involvement in their children's schools and changes in literacy achievement between kindergarten and fifth grade for approximately 300 low-income families and their children. We were particularly interested in activities in which families participated within their children's schools—such as attending open houses, parent-teacher conferences, and other school organization

meetings, as well as visiting and volunteering in the classroom. We believe that two primary findings from this study have important implications for educational policy and practice:

1. *Increases in family involvement in the school predict increases in literacy achievement.* Between kindergarten and fifth grade, increases in family involvement were associated with improvements in low-income children's literacy achievement. In other words, if families who were initially uninvolved in the school became more involved, their children's literacy improved. Importantly, our results indicate that even one or two additional involvement activities per year were associated with meaningful improvements for children. We found that increased family involvement in school had greater implications for children's literacy than did family income, maternal level of education, or child ethnicity.

2. *Family involvement in school matters most for children at greatest risk.* Between kindergarten and fifth grade, high levels of family involvement were most strongly and positively associated with the literacy achievement of children whose families were low-income and whose mothers had very low levels of education. For children with the exceptional risk of having low income and low parent education, there were exceptional achievement rewards associated with high family involvement. Although there was an achievement gap in average literacy performance between children of more and less educated mothers when family involvement levels were low, this gap was nonexistent when family involvement levels were high.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Our results support the usefulness of family involvement in schools as a means of improving the achievement of children living in low-income families, especially those who face the additional challenge of low parent education. In light of our findings, we recommend that schools view family involvement over the long term, ideally creating an educational environment that increases the involvement of families who are less involved and that helps sustain that involvement across elementary school. We recommend that practitioners also consider research indicating that increases in family involvement are most likely to occur among lower-income families when schools not only reach out to families and invite them to become involved, but also when schools help these families overcome barriers to involvement such as child care and transportation needs (for a review, see Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Although this is a tall order, our study adds to an increasing body of evidence that family educational involvement is vital for promoting the life chances of low-income children and provides exceptional benefits for the very same low-income children who face exceptional challenges.

### **References**

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